

# Toward a Curriculum Theory

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*"A real value of curricular theory lies not in the specificity of it, but in the questions it proliferates."*

**M**MUCH confusion exists as to what curriculum theory is. Part of this confusion grows out of the all too common assumption among many educators that there is a curriculum theory. There is no one curriculum theory: there are a multiplicity of curriculum theories—some very explicit, some implied—all of which have their disciples.

In addition, there is no one curriculum theory that is better than all of the others. A school district or a department of a school may have developed a curriculum theory which was reached through consensus, imposition, or a variety of means, which seems to be right for them. But this must be made clear: curriculum theory is laden with the normative. Even after a curriculum theory is asserted, the underlying assumptions are still there whether recognized or not.

In addition, curriculum theory is confused with learning theory and instructional theory, even administrative theory; and admittedly, although these are not mutually exclusive theoretical categories, each has distinctive characteristics.

What, then, are the major characteristics of curriculum theory?

● First, curriculum theory has an ontological bias; its ultimate concern is with the "what" or "why" of any educational enterprise. The primary concern is with neither

teaching nor learning but with knowledge itself, whether process or product knowledge.

● Second, curriculum theory deals with alternative intellectual structures for organizing knowledge. In fact, each alternative structure assumes an answer to the question: What knowledge is of most worth?

● Third, curriculum theory moves toward the universal and the abstract. Curriculum theory is macrocosmic, more or less, to the microcosmic curriculum taught in each individual classroom. For example, a teacher who lets a textbook, a curriculum guide, a unit plan, or a workbook determine the curriculum in his or her classroom is substituting for a larger, more comprehensive curriculum construct whether or not it is admitted or recognized. Curriculum theory becomes a more viable concern of state departments of education, school districts, curriculum councils and a less viable concern as one moves to the practical and the operational. This does not mean, however, that theory becomes less important for the classroom teacher, but curriculum theory loses its distinctiveness where a teacher is forced by the immediacy of the situation to be concerned with methodology, motivation, and content concomitantly.

Curriculum theory can be further clarified by briefly hitting some of the major curricular structures. These constructs can

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range from the classical to the contemporary.

*Logical Structure:* In this curriculum theory, knowledge is systematically organized as a whole. Curriculum theory is based on the specialized disciplines. The best examples of this curriculum theory are architectonics and zetetics where the emphasis is placed on the logical structure, classification, and organization of knowledge. Curriculum theory becomes a prerequisite to learning theory, and instructional theory becomes an implied result. The teacher transmits logically and the student learns. Architectonics has nine generic classes of knowledge with three categories of extension and three categories of intension. Zetetics has five zones and twelve sectors of knowledge.

*Conceptual Structure:* Jean Piaget's descriptive rationale of internal mental processes is in essence a curricular theory; he was not directly concerned with prediction or with the methodology of teaching. His organization structure of schema, assimilation, accommodation, equilibrium is simply a classical epistemology. Only by assumptions built upon assumptions can his conceptual structure be translated into instructional theory. The real strength of his structure is its generative quality: it fosters hypothesizing. Learning theory in Piaget's rationale is much like instructional theory in the logical structure discussed earlier. It is the dark side of the moon. There is a genetically determinant mode of conceptual development that operates throughout life and is unique to each individual.

*Cognitive Structure:* Jerome S. Bruner has no definitive curricular theory except as it is assumed. One is reminded of what Whitehead asked Dewey—"Why don't you go ahead and build an ontology?" Bruner can no more build a curriculum theory that is definitive than could Dewey build a definitive ontology, yet Dewey conjectured an ontology of experiences. So Bruner's curriculum theory cannot develop simply out of a logical, *a priori* structure. Both logic and psychology are important. Curriculum theory cannot stand alone: curriculum theory must be a part of learning theory and instructional

theory. As he wrote, "I think a theory of development must be linked both to a theory of knowledge and to a theory of instruction, or be doomed to triviality."<sup>1</sup> Does Bruner actually have a curriculum theory? Yes. What is it? It depends on a multiplicity of factors—the situation, the human goals, the hypothesizing, and the testing. His curriculum theory has to be seen as intelligence operating in the real world.

*Empirical Structure:* Activity analysis and job analysis popularized by Bobbitt, Morrison, and Charters during the 1920's and 30's is an example of using the scientific method, especially descriptive survey methods, to study the adult community to determine the curriculum. This curricular theory was based on the conservative assumption that the school should reflect the adult society. Curriculum theory then was specified by discovering through empirical data just what was necessary for an adult to know how to adjust well to the social setting.

*Existential Structure:* Paradoxically, to say that existential theory implies no structure says empathically that there is a structure. The point is that there is no institutionalized structure. Individuals appropriate their own curricula. The existential structure is that individual meaning comes from individual appropriation. Each individual will freely choose what myths he or she wishes to live by.

Other curricular theory constructs could be pointed to—a biological structure or psychological structure, an ethological-ecological structure; but the five examples here point toward the distinctiveness of curricular theory.

A real value of curricular theory lies not in the specificity of it, but in the questions it proliferates. Curriculum theory dealt with in isolation goes nowhere. Curriculum theory leads to learning theory which leads to instructional theory which leads to curriculum development which leads to the classroom which leads to Johnny Jones whom all this is about. □

<sup>1</sup> Jerome S. Bruner. *Toward a Theory of Instruction*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1966. p. 21.

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